

Notes and Documents

HERGESHEIMER'S USE OF HISTORICAL SOURCES

By JOHN TYREE FAIN

COMMENTATORS OFTEN RANK JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER high among writers of popular historical works. In one such opinion the late Sarah Haardt (Mrs. H. L. Mencken) gives an account of the author's method of composition, an account which is interesting when considering two of the sources of *Swords and Roses*.¹ She says, "Always in his period works, Joseph Hergesheimer has begun by having a vital interest in a particular person and in all the people surrounding him." Next comes the visualizing process; he must actually see some vivid, characterizing detail in the life of the person he has chosen.² Then comes the research:

Within a week he was plunged into an exhaustive course of reading. Bibliographies and books poured into the room in which he writes. . . . Joseph Hergesheimer attacked the piles in a kind of fury, he read concentratedly, ceaselessly, often as many as ten books a day; sometimes he made notes in his small cramped hand, or marked places with slips of paper, but usually he just read, absorbing facts, details, minutiae of the period, until he was overwhelmed with the sense of being there.³

There were, says Miss Haardt, eighty-five thousand words of notes for *Quiet Cities*.

¹ Joseph Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1929). Quotations from *Swords and Roses* in this paper are made with the permission of the publisher.

² Sarah Haardt, "Joseph Hergesheimer's Methods," in *Bookman* (New York, 1895-1933), LXIX (1929), 399-400.

³ *Ibid.*, 400.

The research and notes for *Swords and Roses* were even more comprehensive. . . . When they were completed, each set contained a detailed chronology, thousands of words on the events, together with highly detailed notes at the end of a purely descriptive nature and a formal bibliography. Obviously there was material here for a book rather than a paper, though actually all of it went into the texture of his writing. He was prepared to write now, three thousand words a day, scarcely a word of which he ever changes.⁴

Of the nine sketches in *Swords and Roses*, a group of portraits of the Old South, the present notes treat of only two: "The Pillar of Words" (William Lowndes Yancey) and "The Lonely Star" (Albert Sidney Johnston). Hergesheimer's method in his sketches is to give a series of important scenes from the lives of his subjects and to summarize briefly in between when necessary. As far as I can tell, all of the summarized material in "The Pillar of Words" comes from J. W. Dubose's biography of Yancey.⁵ The treatment of Dubose's material in the scenes themselves can be observed in the following comparison:

HERGESHEIMER

His first oration was delivered at Lodi, where there was a celebration of the Declaration of Independence. He was constantly interrupted with the question, "Will you not fight for the land of your birth?" and he continu-

DUBOSE

The first speech of Yancey's in the campaign, of which there remains any report, was an oration delivered at Lodi, Abbeville District, on the occasion of the celebration there of the anniversary of the Declaration of Independ-

⁴ *Ibid.*, 401. Other comments on his ability in historical research might be noticed: ". . . Mr. Hergesheimer is at home with the cool insouciance of genius, at home as he could not be without an erudition founded in the keenest observation and research." (Carl Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists* [New York, 1922], 124.) "That he should have taken the very greatest pains to ensure his accuracy of historical detail is nothing; what matters is the complete success with which this scholarship appears as recreative understanding." Geoffrey West, "Joseph Hergesheimer," in *Virginia Quarterly Review* [Charlottesville, 1926-], VIII [1932], 95.) "Hergesheimer was as much an antiquarian as a novelist, and his books were rightly regarded as protests against the slovenly generalizations of popular romance. . . . The research behind his novel of Pennsylvania ironmasters (*The Three Black Pennys*, 1917) or his story of Salem and the China trade (*Java Head*, 1919) was paralleled by the careful and laborious preparation made by Sinclair Lewis for each of his novels of Middle America." (Robert E. Spiller and others [eds.], *Literary History of the United States* [3 vols., New York, 1949], II, 1235-36.)

⁵ J. W. Dubose, *The Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey* (Birmingham, Ala., 1892).

ally replied, "Where liberty is there is my country." If South Carolina became the advocate of anarchy, William Lowndes Yancey proceeded, he would not follow. He gazed at his audience, assembled in a meadow, and remarked the men around him, scarred and broken with age, who had been soldiers in the old war for independence. There was a prodigious supper spread under the trees, toasts were proposed and drained; Yancey rose and, in place of a conventional period, he begged to read a sentiment handed him by a lady.⁶

ence. . . . The orator said the Nullifiers continually brought up one question: "Will you not fight for the land of your birth?" To this he would make answer: "Where liberty is, there is my country." If South Carolina became the advocate of anarchy he, for one, would not follow her lead. Looking around him, he saw men bent with age and marked with scars. . . . they were old soldiers of the war for liberty. . . . A great feast was spread under the trees and at the conclusion toasts were called. . . . he rose and begged to read a sentiment which had just been handed to him by a lady, in lieu of anything less expressive which he might say for himself.⁷

Sometimes even the summaries have been made by Dubose, and Hergesheimer can paraphrase them as follows:

HERGESHEIMER

. . . at twenty-one he married Sarah Caroline, the fifth daughter of George Washington Earle and of his wife Elizabeth Robinson. The Earles were fine with pride, a handsome race of wide influence and properties in upper South Carolina, and young Yancey settled on a farm inherited by his wife, where he owned thirty-five slaves. He adopted with the ardor that was his

DUBOSE

Three days after arriving at his majority . . . Mr. Yancey was married to Miss Sarah Caroline, fifth daughter of George Washington Earle. . . . This gentleman seems to have descended from George Washington Earle and his wife Elizabeth Robinson. . . . The Earles were a proud and handsome race, exercising decided influence in the upper part of South Carolina. Immedi-

⁶ Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses*, 45.

⁷ Dubose, *Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey*, 64.

fundamental virtue a pastoral and domestic life.

The year after his marriage, in the habit of his class, he bought cotton lands in Alabama; he spent the winters on his plantation there, with his family and slaves; but he returned to Greenville in summer. Yancey maintained a slight but continued interest in South Carolina affairs, and, early in the September of Eighteen-thirty-eight, he rode out twelve miles from Greenville to a muster of militia and political debate. A General Waddy Thompson and Judge Joseph N. Whitner were contesting an election to the lower House of Congress. The gentlemen, with the orations at an end, were gathered in coteries discussing the characters and prospects of the candidates. . . .⁸

ately after his marriage Mr. Yancey settled with his wife upon a farm, inherited by her, where they owned about thirty-five slaves. Of all pursuits of life, agriculture was his choice and upon this he entered with ardor. . . . Mr. Yancey removed his family and his slaves to Alabama the year after his marriage, spent the winters there in the oversight of his cotton plantation, and returned with his family to spend the summers near Greenville. . . . Early in September, 1838, he rode to the muster of a militia company, twelve miles from Greenville, where, after the military exercises, it was expected a debate would be held between General Waddy Thompson and Judge Joseph N. Whitner, candidates for the lower House of Congress. After the debate ended gentlemen, in coteries, standing on the ground, discussed the prospects of the candidates.⁹

This passage leads into another important scene, taken in great detail from the source, in which Yancey shoots Robinson Earle, his wife's uncle. A more significant comparison, however, is a passage right after the shooting scene, for here we see an example of Hergesheimer's habit of using bits of vivid description which he finds in his source:

HERGESHEIMER

Governor Patrick Noble remitted two-thirds of the fine and gave

DUBOSE

Governor Patrick Noble remitted two-thirds of the fine and

⁸ Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses*, 45-46.

⁹ Dubose, *Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey*, 70-74.

the prisoner his liberty.

When, after his affair with Doctor Robinson Earle, Mr. Yancey returned permanently to Alabama, the Southwest was at the height of what was called the flush times. An extraordinary migration, not of the poor but of the rich, filled the roads leading out of Georgia—long trains of white-topped wagons followed by marching scores of slaves, black men and women and children. Their masters, the aristocratic proprietors of Virginia and South Carolina, rode at the heads of the processions. They established themselves again in a new and prodigally fertile land, a land watered with innumerable springs, where the hoofs of deer were dyed crimson with the wild strawberries covering the ground.¹⁰

released the prisoner. Mr. Yancey then returned with his family to Alabama. . . . "Flush times" enveloped the Southwest. No state was so rapidly populated by a wealthy immigration as Ala-

bama. The roads leading out from Georgia were filled by white top wagons, followed by marching scores of black men, women and children. At the head of the procession rode Virginian or Carolinian, leading his inheritance Exposing a beautiful landscape, a generous soil, from which countless springs of pure water gushed, the wild deer's hoof dyed with the juice of the wild strawberry growing on every knoll, this valley was the most attractive situation of the whole Southwest.¹¹

The treatment of source material is similar in "The Lonely Star," which forms the fifth section of *Swords and Roses*. Here the source book is Johnston's life by his son.¹² The first comparison illustrates Hergesheimer's method of transposing the detailed narrative from his source and also his practice of copying lists of names. This is a scene just before the Battle of Shiloh:

HERGESHEIMER

Saturday night, after storms and rain, was clear; Johnston slept quietly in an ambulance

JOHNSTON

The night was clear, calm, and beautiful. General Johnston . . . slept quietly in an ambulance-

¹⁰ Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses*, 47-48.

¹¹ Dubose, *Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey*, 75-81.

¹² William Preston Johnston, *The Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston* (New York, 1879).

wagon. The morning was cool, with the pure freshness and scents of spring. As he mounted, General Johnson said confidentially to his officers, "Tonight we will water our horses in the Tennessee River." Sharp skirmishing began before he reached the front. He met Colonel Marmaduke—who had been with him in Utah—holding the center of the Confederate line. "My son," Johnston said, "We must this day conquer or perish." He cried, "Men of Arkansas, they say you boast of your prowess with the bowie knife. Today you wield a nobler weapon—the bayonet. Employ it well." He moved from position to position supported by men who loved, who adored, him: Leonidas Polk, his friend all through life; Hardee, for six years his major; Breckinridge, bound to him by old and indissoluble ties; Gilmer was his engineer. His staff followed him, surrounded him, with reverence—Preston and Brewster were part of it, Jack and O'Hara. Hardcastle and Bowen and Rich, a score of young officers, had been his pupils at war. Basil Duke followed him from civil life; Morgan and Colonel R. A. Johnson and Colonel Ben Anderson were sons of early friends; Gibson, many others, were allied to him by blood and marriage;

wagon. . . . Morning opened with all the delicate fragrance and beauty of the season. . . . Turning to his staff, as he mounted, he exclaimed, "Tonight we will water our horses in the Tennessee River." . . .

Sharp skirmishing had begun before he reached the front. Here he met Colonel John S. Marmaduke. . . . he held the centre of the front line. . . . Marmaduke had been with General Johnston in Utah. . . . "My son, we must this day conquer or perish!" . . . "Men of Arkansas!" he exclaimed . . . "they say you boast of your prowess with the bowie-knife. To-day you wield a nobler weapon—the bayonet. Employ it well." . . . he rode from point to point. . . . Everywhere he beheld men bound to him by ties of ancient friendship. . . . There was Polk, his life-long friend; Hardee, for the last six years his major. . . . Breckinridge, bound to him by many ties . . . and Gilmer, his trusted engineer. Around him was a staff who followed him with filial reverence—Preston, Brewster, O'Hara, Jack, and others. Among the younger soldiers were many who had been his pupils in war—Hardcastle, Bowen, Rich, and many more. From the walks of civil life had come . . . the dashing Duke, the

Wharton and Ashbel Smith came with the Texans.¹³

wily Morgan, Colonel R. A. Johnson, Colonel Ben Anderson, all sons of his early friends; Gibson . . . and many more allied by blood or marriage; and a gallant band of Texans, Wharton, Ashbel Smith, and others. . . .¹⁴

In speaking of Hergesheimer's process of imaginative visualization of his material, Miss Haardt says, "He had a clear picture of General Johnston as he rode down the line on the field at Shiloh."¹⁵ The following comparison avouches the truth of Miss Haardt's observation:

HERGESHEIMER

General Johnston rode slowly along the line, his hat was off and his sword was in its scabbard. In his right hand he held a little tin cup¹⁶

JOHNSTON

General Johnston rode out in front, and slowly down the line. His hat was off. His sword rested in its scabbard. In his right hand he held a little tin cup¹⁷

The battle begins:

HERGESHEIMER

He rode easily, on a thoroughbred horse named Fire-eater. His voice was compelling. "Men," he cried, "they are stubborn. I must lead you." A sheet of fire burst from the Federal position along the crest of a ridge; the Confederate line sank in death through the dark valley; the Confederates went up to the

JOHNSTON

He sat his beautiful thoroughbred bay, "Fire-eater," with easy command. . . . His voice was persuasive, encouraging, and compelling. . . . "Men! they are stubborn I will lead you!" he cried. . . . A sheet of flame burst from the Federal stronghold, and blazed along the crest of the ridge. . . . The Confed-

¹³ Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses*, 166-67.

¹⁴ Johnston, *Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston*, 582-84.

¹⁵ Haardt, "Joseph Hergesheimer's Methods," 399.

¹⁶ Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses*, 167.

¹⁷ Johnston, *Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston*, 612.

crest of the hill; the Union troops fell back. Johnston's horse was shot in four places, his uniform was cut by bullets, his boot sole was torn by a minié ball¹⁸

erate line withered, and the dead and dying strewed the dark valley. . . . Right up the steep they went. The crest was gained. The enemy were in flight. . . . His noble horse was shot in four places; his clothes were pierced by missiles, his boot-sole was cut and torn by a Minié¹⁹

This seems sufficient to indicate Hergesheimer's method. Although I have not checked every fact, allusion, and figure of speech against the source material, the check was dishearteningly successful as far as I went. The evidence shows that in the two sketches under consideration Hergesheimer is not synthesizing masses of material, using hundreds of records, steeping himself in the period. It shows instead that he is using two source books—and probably nothing else. It also raises incidentally the question as to how closely a writer of popular period works may legitimately follow his sources. The main purpose is somehow to get the flavor of the period, and a writer may be able to get it only by quoting old records. Hergesheimer may justify in this way his use of source material. However, I believe that for the type of work he is doing in *Swords and Roses*, which purports to be actual history in a popular form, Hergesheimer is closer to his originals than a first-class man of letters should be. At any rate, if his use of sources in the other parts of *Swords and Roses* and in the other historical works is similar to that here indicated, his method of composition is not at all like the somewhat romantic account given by Miss Haardt, and we can agree without qualification with the statement which she attributes to the author himself: "There is nothing in his method of marshaling his material, he insists, that has the slightest thing to do with scholarship."²⁰

¹⁸ Hergesheimer, *Swords and Roses*, 167.

¹⁹ Johnston, *Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston*, 612.

²⁰ Haardt, "Joseph Hergesheimer's Methods," 400.